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COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

U.S. House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-6035

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS

July 12, 2013

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ROBERT L. SIMMONS, II, STAFF DIRECTOR

The President
The White House
Washington D.C., 20500

Dear President Obama,

I write with great surprise concerning recent suggestions in the press by Jay Carney, George Little, and unnamed sources in the *New York Times* that your Administration is giving serious consideration to a "zero option" in Afghanistan that would accelerate the withdrawal of U.S. forces and fail to leave a residual force to secure U.S. interests following the end of the NATO mission in 2014.

Here at the Armed Services Committee we have conducted extensive oversight of our strategy in Afghanistan and in hearing after hearing we have heard from your senior military and administration witnesses that a residual force is key to a successful transition in Afghanistan – and yet in the middle of the summer fighting season with our troops in harm's way, the Administration floats a zero option trial balloon with no apparent strategic rationale.

You undoubtedly agree that there are real consequences associated with a complete U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. At the U.S. Military Academy in 2009, you correctly noted that: "our security is at stake in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is the epicenter of violent extremism practiced by al Qaeda. It is from here that we were attacked on 9/11, and it is from here that new attacks are being plotted as I speak. This is no idle danger; no hypothetical threat." It is difficult to square your dire warning at West Point some 36 months ago with reports of a "zero option" today. Has the threat idled? Has our national security equity in Afghanistan and Pakistan subsided?

I agree that in order to commit U.S. forces to Afghanistan, we must have a capable partner in the Afghan Government willing to meet certain reasonable conditions. I further understand that President Karzai has been non-committal and truculent when it comes to meeting those conditions. But, your Administration's policies have not helped. For example how does

those conditions. But, your Administration's policies have not helped. For example how does negotiating with the Taliban about Afghanistan's future, while excluding Afghanistan's elected government- support your own stated goals?

Further, by signaling that the United States may further accelerate its withdrawal, we embolden our enemies while we simultaneously weaken President Karzai. And we undermine the very security and governance we have worked so hard to achieve in Afghanistan for the last 11 years. As our commander in Afghanistan recently testified before my committee, regarding the Taliban message that the United States will abandon Afghanistan after 2014, "There is a growing sense that December 2014 is a cliff for the Afghan people. That dynamic must be addressed with a credible, compelling narrative of U.S. commitment. Absent confidence in the hope for a brighter future, Afghan leaders, the Afghan people, and regional actors will continue to hedge and plan for the worst case. The behaviors associated with that mindset have the very real potential to undermine the campaign."

That sentiment was furthered echoed by Secretary Panetta, who said: "The fundamental mission in Afghanistan is to establish [a nation] that can secure and govern itself and ensure that al-Qaida, never again, finds a safe haven within Afghanistan from which to conduct attacks on the United States or any other country."

To achieve that goal, Panetta laid out three objectives for post-2014. "One is obviously [counterterrorism] to ensure that we continue to go after whatever al-Qaida targets remain in Afghanistan... We also are going to continue to have a train-and-assist mission to help develop the capability of the Afghan Army... The third mission will be to continue to provide some enabling capability so that we can provide the support needed for our forces as well."

The New York Times story links the faltering bilateral security agreement negotiations to the "surprise of American officials" when President Karzai abruptly ended the negotiations. Given earlier failed attempts at negotiations with the Taliban in 2011, and the hostile reactions from the Government of Afghanistan, which felt excluded, the reports of your Administration's reaction are puzzling. Was a different outcome expected? Does your Administration plan to press forward with negotiations with the Taliban at the expense of sealing the bilateral security agreement our own commanders have identified as vital to future Afghan peace and security?

There are also more personal consequences for the men and women we sent to protect this great nation after 9/11. General Petraeus, the former Commander of U.S. Central Command and ISAF commander, testified before the House Armed Services Committee in 2011, "The Taliban and al Qaeda, obviously would trumpet this [the withdrawal of U.S. forces] as a victory, as a success. Needless to say it would completely undermine everything our troopers have fought so much for... this would close the door on a very, very hard-fought effort and end a mission that I think is seeking to achieve a very, very important security objective of our country

as well as of our allies...And what it would do to the region, of course, would be of really incalculable consequence as well...We've had well over a thousand reasons to get this thing right, and many thousands more whose lives have been changed forever because of grievous wounds." And it bears reminding that lives of countless Afghan women and children are at stake should the Taliban return.

It is difficult not to draw parallels between the zero option in Afghanistan and the troubling consequences of the zero option in Iraq. Media reports state that there were nearly 800 killed and 1800 wounded in Iraq last month as sectarian violence spreads. Former ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, who served multiple administrations, has recently cautioned "I'm not sure that military forces alone are capable of handling these kinds of terror attacks. It's more of an intelligence function. But that said, I certainly was a proponent for a continued although reduced presence, precisely to provide some of these capabilities, including special ops, to the Iraqis. Yes, I wish it had been possible to get that agreement in 2010 and have us still on the ground there."

Syria is engulfed in civil war. Iraq teeters on the brink of civil war. And experts have warned that premature withdrawal from Afghanistan could open the door to that nation's third civil war in as many decades. Given the national security interests you accurately described in your West Point speech, would U.S. security be better served by abandoning Afghanistan to its uncertain fate, or by helping a difficult, but fledgling democracy stand and endure? Have senior military leaders or intelligence officials formally recommended this course of action?

Would opening the door to a third civil war in the region, and the second created by a hasty U.S. exit, support your goal of ending the war on terrorism and creating a lasting peace in the region?

Perhaps most concerning is the pervasive sense of confusion that has sprung out of a national security policy that shifts as fluidly as sand. Your Administration announced a surge of forces in 2009, but attached harmful time-stamp to that strategically sensible policy. Despite impressive gains by those surging forces, your Administration pulled those forces out right as the effort was bearing fruit. Your Administration promised a residual force that would stabilize those gains, but now float off-the-record proposals that contradict on-the-record promises. You have a record of ignoring your commanders' recommendations; this time please heed their warnings.

Heightening this confusion is the mixed signals I have received from senior members of your Administration. One told me plainly that the zero option was never under consideration. That completely contradicts the statements of both the White House and Pentagon press secretaries, both of whom insist your Administration is giving serious thought to a complete withdrawal. It is more than a little troubling that your advisors were informing congress that no

zero option is being considered on the same day that your spokesman tells the press such an option is under consideration.

Mr. President, I have often said that you have my support as you work to achieve a lasting peace in Afghanistan. But I am uncertain if we are still working towards the same goal. Last month, General Dunford announced "Milestone 2013," and applauded U.S. and allied forces for entering the final phase of transition of security responsibility to the Afghan National Security Forces. At West Point, you said this was one of your key mission goals in Afghanistan. Why then, Mr. President, are you silent when U.S. forces and their allies successfully complete a tough mission that you assigned? Why have you not lauded the on-the-ground gains secured by your Administration? When Afghanistan is only spoken in terms of failure and quagmire, despite impressive operational gains, failure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; defeat snatched from the jaws of victory.

Tens of thousands of Americans have fought, and thousands of them have died, carrying out your orders in Afghanistan. You have been quick to articulate the challenges they face, but you owe them much more. Mr. President you have a moral obligation to tell the American people about the successes our troops and their Afghan allies have experienced. On that front, sir, you have been inexplicably silent.

Your Administration has publicly committed to post-2014 Afghanistan. Whether it is red lines in Syria or Iran, or promises to our allies, America's word must mean something. America's word must count. It is imperative that we do not set a decade's worth of blood, treasure, and sacrifice up for failure. It is equally imperative that we do not allow frustrations, however justifiable, with the Karzai government to lock us into playing the short game. Do not make this effort personality dependent. The security interests of our country must not rely on one person. This effort must be seen through to successful conclusion, both for U.S. national security and our allies.

Despite some reservations, I have been steadfast in my support for your efforts and this mission. But I must ask that, if the zero option is under serious consideration, your Administration explain how our national security and that of our allies is advanced by that strategy.

Respectfully,



Howard P. "Buck" McKeon
Chairman

CC: The Honorable Chuck Hagel, Secretary of Defense
The Honorable John Kerry, Secretary of State
The Honorable Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff